

April 21, 2022

Written Testimony Montgomery County's Fiscal Year 2023 Recommended Operating Budget

Submitted by: Sylvia S Tognetti – in support of the Climate Action Plan Coalition Workgroup on Adaptation & Sequestration

Dear Montgomery County Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the County Executive's recommended operating budget for addressing climate change adaptation and sequestration. Although testifying in an individual capacity, my testimony supports the Climate Action Plan Coalition (CAP-C) and reflects the perspective of its working group on Adaptation & Sequestration, and will focus on these components of the budget, which intersect with and provide opportunities to address equity concerns.

I have been a longtime advocate for Nature-Based Solutions – also known as green or natural infrastructure, also through my role as President of Friends of Ten Mile Creek, as a participant in the Montgomery County Forest Coalition and the Stormwater Partners Network, as a consultant, and as a member of the County Climate Workgroup on Adaptation & Sequestration. In a professional capacity, I have also served on research teams for national and international studies on watershed ecosystem services and water affordability and was a co-author for a chapter of the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

Given that we are in an emergency situation with regard to not only our climate – which intersects with racial equity and social justice as well as security, it is not possible to ever provide sufficient funding for all that needs to be done. However, given the context of needing to also meet other ongoing needs as well as to stand up new programs and build County capacity to meet these challenges, this budget presents a giant leap forward and would position the County to take advantage of further opportunities to reduce emissions and increase climate resilience as they become available.

Therefore, the Coalition strongly supports the significant increase in funding for components of the FY 23 recommended operating budget for climate change adaptation and sequestration. This funding supports the development of a comprehensive flood management program, complemented by a program to implement Natural Climate Solutions, and is combined with education and outreach to vulnerable communities and equitable community engagement. Stormwater management activities also support the County's response to climate change even if not included in the category of climate change line items in the budget. As you heard in testimony of Stormwater Partners, meeting the requirements of the MS4/stormwater permit is not sufficient for coping with the added challenges brought by climate change, which has already increased heavy storms and flooding. The added funding will be an important complement to these existing programs.

Natural Climate Solutions are actions which protect the critical natural or green infrastructure, from forests, wetlands, streams and ecosystems which are critical not only to our local environment but also to the functioning of the entire earth system which regulates our climate. Unlike single purpose grey infrastructure, such solutions provide numerous benefits beyond carbon sequestration, which provide a foundation for climate resilience. These include flood mitigation, water quality protection, reduction of the urban heat island effect and cooling through shade and evapotranspiration, and all of the quality of life and health benefits associated with green spaces.

This critical natural infrastructure also provides a foundation for protecting critical water infrastructure systems as a complement to gray infrastructure. Examples are the sewer pipes that run under or near our streams that leak after they become exposed and battered by erosion, increases in water infiltration and storage in groundwater which maintains flow and sustains our drinking water supply, and reduction of sediment loads and other pollutants which increase the cost of water treatment. The upgrade of the WSSC water filtration plant to manage sediment loads – much of it from upper Montgomery County, is now adding over 1.5% to our water rates.

Critical infrastructure is defined as “systems and assets, physical or virtual, so vital that their incapacity or destruction would have a debilitating impact on security, economic security, public health or safety.” The OLO review of Critical Infrastructure Sectors further identifies water systems as being among the lifeline critical infrastructure sectors because their “disruption or loss of functions would directly affect the security and resiliency of other sectors.” Natural critical infrastructure is therefore a lifeline of our lifeline critical infrastructure and merits even higher priority than infrastructure that is merely “critical”.

Before addressing specific components of the budget, I want to acknowledge the privilege of many in the Coalition including myself who are able to volunteer a significant amount of their time as advocates. It is well known that climate and other environmental hazards have disproportionate impacts on disadvantaged communities – those with fewer trees, those living in low lying areas, and, as seen during the rain bomb last September, in basement apartments. Less obvious are impacts on low-income rate payers for whom water bills constitute a larger percentage of their income. Therefore, we commend the County for its actions and supporting budget to meaningfully engage those who aren't here so that their voices and visions for the future can be heard directly, and so that climate actions can be designed or co-created to improve equity and support a more inclusive vision for the future.

The recommended budget supports a comprehensive flood management strategy which includes resources necessary to identify and map high risk areas. This information is badly needed but the study needs to be expanded to also identify patterns of basement flooding. To provide some context, I was among a handful of people who started making inquiries about flooding data of different County offices sometime in 2018-19, before the climate workgroups were set up, because we were hearing so many anecdotal accounts of basement flooding and mold, supplemented by news about increases in flood events associated with increases in

heavy rainfall. We found that, at the time, County information on flooding was also anecdotal, and largely still is because, until now, COVID made it impossible to add line items to the budget – so it took a few years to get Council approval to approve the added position for a hydrologist in the Office of Emergency Management. The added funding for this study in the CE recommended budget is critical as it should enable us to finally get less anecdotal information on flooding and begin to actually do something about it.

The CE recommended budget also proposes a Natural Climate Solutions program manager and additional mapping to identify priority areas, i.e., to maximize the many co-benefits of tree canopy and forests for equity, stormwater management, health, etc. This will complement the flood mapping as well as existing stormwater management programs and can better inform integration of land and water considerations in the land use planning process. In existing stormwater management programs, I want to highlight the Rainscapes Program, which is among the few tools for managing stormwater on private property and has been understaffed and oversubscribed. We were pleased to see modest additional funding for this program in the DEP operating budget. An increase in the fee-in-lieu paid in exchange for waivers from stormwater management obligations on new development would be an appropriate source of additional funding for Rainscapes. We know anecdotally that these waivers are increasing basement flooding (and led to erosion of the stream in my own backyard). And we know the cost to the county of mitigating stormwater impacts far outweighs the current waiver fee.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention back to the recent review of Critical Infrastructure Sectors by the Montgomery County Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO), which found that “flooding poses the most serious risk” to infrastructure and that historic data shows:

- “Increase in urban flooding from two to four occurrences per year before 2010 to 11 to 39 occurrences per year since 2010;
- “Average of nine flash flood warnings per year; and
- “Increase in the number of complaints related to nuisance flooding (e.g., water in basement, flooded yards).”

The OLO report was published prior to the basement flooding that led to the death of one person in a basement apartment in Rockville last September. It also identifies the Little Seneca dam as a high hazard. Among the potential actions identified by OLO, that can be taken to address climate risks is: an “increase in land protections and stream revitalization efforts to protect existing supply aquifers and watersheds”. This is based on actions identified in the then Draft Climate Action Plan which the County has the authority to implement.

To reiterate, given the climate emergency, it is simply not possible to provide sufficient funding for all that needs to be done. The recommended Operating Budget can always be improved but even as is, represents a giant leap forward. Therefore, the Climate Action Plan Coalition strongly supports the recommended budget for climate adaptation and sequestration.



I would like to leave you with a picture of sediment-laden floodwaters pouring into the Little Seneca Reservoir - a drought backup drinking water supply – during the July 2019 rain bomb (photo posted by Montgomery Parks to Facebook July 8, 2019).

I also call your attention to an article about high water ON the beltway during more recent heavy rainfall:

<https://wtop.com/montgomery-county/2022/04/high-water-causes-backups-delays-on-i-495-inner-loop-near-river-road-in-md/>